EXHIBITING CULTURES

The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display

Edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine

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On the cover and title page: *Aboriginal dancers at the opening ceremonies of the Commonwealth Games, Brisbane, Australia, 1982.* Photo by Eckhard Supp. Reproduced by permission of the photographer.

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Exhibiting cultures

CHAPTER 12

Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion

SUSAN VOGEL

Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them. Museums provide an experience of most of the world's art and artifacts that does not bear even the remotest resemblance to what their makers intended. This evident fact lies at the very heart of museum work (which is a work of mediation) and should be a preoccupation of all museum professionals, though most museum visitors seem practically unaware of it. An art exhibition can be construed as an unwitting collaboration between a curator and the artist(s) represented, with the former having by far the most active and influential role. Ironically, the curator's name rarely even appears in the information available in an exhibition (except as the author of the catalogue), and the public is given the false impression of having come into contact with "Goya," "Warhol," or "African art," for example. Museums, it seems to me, have an obligation to let the public know what part of any exhibition is the making of the artists[1] and what part is the curator's interpretation. Disentangling those two elements, however, may not be easy, since at least some of the curator's understanding of his or her material may rest on unquestioned and unexamined cultural—and other—assumptions.

Virtually the only art made to be exhibited in galleries (as opposed to perhaps serving as decoration in galleries) is the art of our

own recent history, that is, Western art since the late eighteenth century. In some measure, we have attributed to the art or artifacts of all times the qualities of our own: that its purpose is to be contemplated, and that its main qualities can be apprehended visually. Egyptian tomb furnishings and Renaissance altars—to say nothing of African art—are routinely exhibited in art museums without a clear examination of even the most basic questions: Can they be regarded as art in our sense? Were they made by people who thought of themselves in terms that correspond to our definition of "artist"? If not, how do we acknowledge that while displaying them in art museums?

African art provides a useful and particularly sharp instance of the distortion produced by exhibiting in museums objects made for quite different purposes. African art has not been included in art museums long enough for its presence to be accepted unthinkingly. If the audience knows one thing about African art, it knows these objects were never meant to be seen in museum buildings. This makes it a fruitful subject for exploring museum presentations, or dislocations—or, as we might most profitably consider it, the recontextualization of objects in museums.

I am a museum practitioner, not a theorist. I have spent most of my professional life creating exhibitions: one permanent installation and many temporary exhibitions. They have been art exhibitions created of material objects in concrete settings, addressed to specific audiences in specific cities at specific moments in time. Mine have all been exhibitions of African art—an art not automatically recognized as art, from a place not politically neutral. While working on them I have taken into account what the audience knew or believed about Africa and have developed strategies to deal with their expectations. Maybe the strategies have resulted in theories.

Western culture has appropriated African art and attributed to it meanings that are overwhelmingly Western. We are aware that the meanings we give to the objects visiting in our homes and museums are not those that inspired their creators. We may be less clear about what the original status (art? craft? sacra?) and meaning might have been.

Many Westerners feel too sharply their ignorance of the original contexts of African art and are too ready to let it blind them to the art's visible qualities. They are less daunted by the impossibility of seeing *any* work of art with the eyes of the original audience, much less those of the artist. The cultural context of much of the world's art,

particularly that large segment which is religious in inspiration, is remote from the contemporary museumgoing public. If nothing else, the aura of faith and reverence with which it was regarded by its intended audience is missing for most of us. We can be insiders only in our own culture and our own time.

That said, I have come to feel that the museum dealing with culture (and even more with non-Western art) cannot adopt the authoritative voice commonly heard in museums of Western art and science. We are too far from the voices of the original owners and makers, too locked into the perspectives of our own culture to presume to be faithful to the object in any exalted way. We can be faithful only in our fashion, which often means we are, like Cole Porter's heroine, only barely faithful, or not at all. And we can be faithful only in the fashion of our time.

Several recent Center for African Art exhibitions have attempted to be faithful in different ways. All renounced the authoritative voice; each represented a strategy for dealing with the drastic recontextualization of African art in Western museums. One that dealt overtly with the selection of exhibition objects, The Art of Collecting African Art,[2] showed not only the objects that were the pride of the collector, but the works that had been passed over as mediocre, altered, restored, or forged. The exhibition invited the viewer to look closely and form his or her own opinion before reading the label that revealed my opinion. Labels were personal, opinionated, and informal in tone rather than didactic.[3] This exhibition was intended to encourage careful looking and did not attempt to teach connoisseurship.[4]

Two other exhibitions sought to empower the visitor to look critically at works of African art and at the same time to heighten awareness of the degree to which what we see in African art is a reflection of ourselves. The first, Perspectives: Angles on African Art, considered the ways we in the West project our needs and our fantasies upon Africa; the second was Art/artifact. Both exhibitions examined Americans rather than Africans: the audience was the subject of the first exhibition, the museum the subject of the second.

Perspectives: Angles on African Art[5] explored the different things African art has come to represent by inviting ten individuals who seemed to hold different points of view to select objects and to discuss their selections and perspectives. The ten cocurators were Americans and Africans who had some connection to African art, though only two were academically trained as African-art specialists. The labels in the exhibition consisted of signed comments by the cocurators. Most

were highly personal, arguable opinions that invited the visitor to agree or disagree. The spectrum of outlooks interpreted African art as a national patrimony; a personal heritage; objects in an art collection; part of the study of art history, or of anthropology; an influence on twentieth-century art; material for artists to draw upon in different ways; and the expression of living religious and political beliefs.[6]

Despite their individuality and their differences, the cocurators were all concerned with the dichotomy between appreciation and understanding, form and meaning; between what David Rockefeller calls the artistic sense, and the scholarly one. It was not a question we raised explicitly in the Perspectives interviews, though it was mentioned again and again. Ivan Karp, an anthropologist, put it most clearly: "I'm really torn between the arguments that are made for universal aesthetic criteria and the idea that we can only truly appreciate something from the point of view of the people for whom it was originally made—that aesthetics are 'culture bound.' "[7] This question is fundamental to the consideration of all non-Western art: How do we legitimately understand or appreciate art from a culture we do not thoroughly know? I suspect most of our visitors are troubled by the issue in an inexplicit way.

The artist cocurators were the least preoccupied by the cultural context of the objects, which they confidently approached as pure sculptural form. Nancy Graves said, "The art is here for us to appreciate intuitively. One may get more information about it which enhances it, but its strength is here for anyone to see."[8] Iba N'Diaye makes no reference to meaning in his commentaries, and describes drawing objects as the way he learned to see them.[9] Romare Bearden feels that information can even inhibit perception: "I had to put the books down and just look at how I felt about it. The books get in the way sometimes."[10] For James Baldwin, the only way to understand is through direct experience. "You want to find out?" he asks. "Go and expose yourself. You can't find out through a middleman anyway." He also says, "There's this curious dichotomy in the West about form and content. The form *is* the content."[11] In this he echoes the African sculptor and diviner, Lela Kouakou, who recognizes no distinction between the two.[12]

William Rubin argues that the distinction between form and content is theoretical, since neither an understanding of the cultural context nor a personal appreciation is possible as a pure experience. "The choices are not between a total contextual reconstruction—which is a mythic pursuit—and a pure aesthetic response, whatever that is. We

don't respond to art objects with one particular set of responses that are isolatable as aesthetic. We respond to them with our total humanity."[13] Dr. Ekpo Eyo, a Nigerian archaeologist, goes further, suggesting that an intermingling of scholarship and emotional aesthetic response leads to understanding. Speaking of his personal experience with archaeological objects, he says, "The more I looked at them, the more I studied them, the more I appreciated their beauty over and above the information about their context. They were beautiful! The more I described them and handled them, the more emotionally attached to them I became. It's like having a baby: you look at the baby all the time, and you begin to discover many things about it which you could not see at first. My eyes opened."[14]

In Perspectives we did not abdicate completely our role as providers of information. We produced a checklist that contained information on the use and meaning the objects had for the original African owners. While I feel the authoritative voice inhibits the visitor, I hardly recommend uninformed free association before African objects—or any other intellectually determined objects—as a particularly full way to experience them if other means are available. But Perspectives was not about African art. It was about approaches to African art.

The exhibition that focused on the museum was Art/artifact.[15] Again, this exhibition was not about African art or Africa. It was not even entirely about art. It was an exhibition about perception and the museum experience, focusing on the ways Westerners have classified and exhibited African objects over the past century. With some objects considered art and others artifacts, our categories do not reflect African ones and have changed over time. The exhibition showed how we view African objects (both literally and figuratively), arguing that much of our vision of Africa and African art has been conditioned by our own culture. I felt that unless we acknowledge that African art as we see it has been shaped by us as much as by Africans, we cannot see it at all.

The exhibition approached the question of perception through individual objects and through installation styles. Recognizing that the physical setting of an object is part of what makes it identifiable as art, the installation showed art objects and nonart objects in such a way as to raise the question in the viewer's mind and to make the trickery of the installation evident. A hunting net from Zaire was one nonaesthetic, nonsignifying object that bore a spurious resemblance to some contemporary artworks. It was reverently displayed in a pool of light on a low platform. (Ironically, an unanticipated response demon-

strated the success of the trickery in some quarters; I and several African-art dealers received inquiries from art collectors about where they might acquire such a marvelous net.) The inverse of this was the display of some extraordinarily fine pieces of African figure sculpture, unemphatically shown in the style of natural-history museums in a case evenly filled with many objects of unequal aesthetic interest, quantities of text, and pictures, which created an all-over "anthropological wallpaper" effect. The indiscriminate assemblage made it hard to see the sculptures as great works of art, though they were perfectly visible.

The exhibition also considered the contexts in which Westerners have seen African art. It began with a clean white room in which African art and artifacts (such as the net) were displayed for their formal qualities only (Figures 12-1, 12-2). No information was provided above the most minimal: "Net, Zande people, Zaire." The next area was small but important: it contained an unedited and untranslated videotape showing the installation of a Mijikenda memorial post,

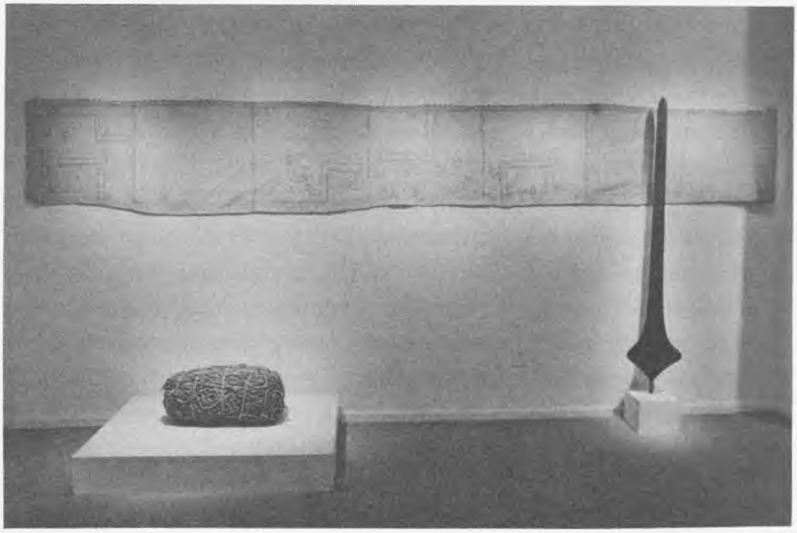

Fig. 12-1. *African objects presented as pure form—as if their form were their meaning. None was ever intended to be seen in the manner shown here. In their original contexts, the raffia textile on the wall was a Kuba woman's skirt wrapper; the rope bundle on the platform was a Zande hunting net, tied up for storage or transportation; the metal blade on the right served as currency in the payment of bridewealth in Kasai. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

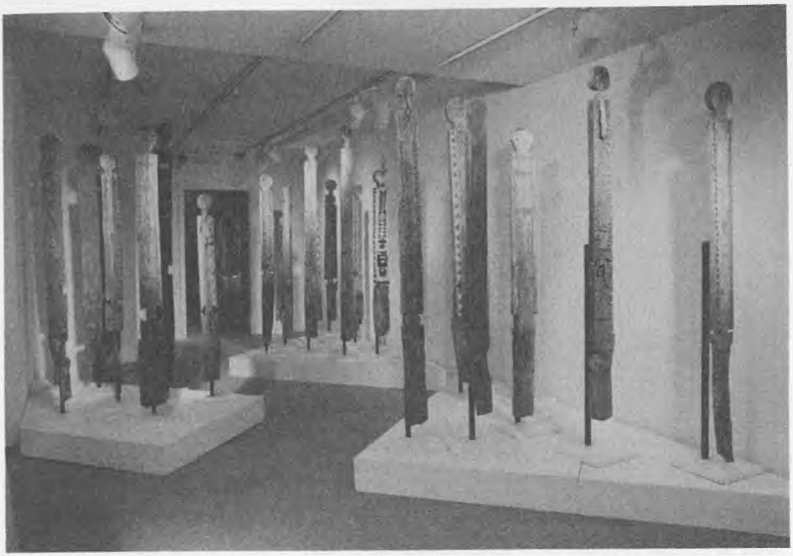

Fig. 12-2. *Mijikenda memorial posts displayed as sculptures. Posts from many graves have been assembled to create an aesthetic and spectral presence unlike anything ever seen by the Mijikenda. Such posts may or may not have been regarded as aesthetic objects by their makers and users. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

accompanied by a label stating that only the original audience could have the original experience—that all other settings were inauthentic and arbitrary to a greater or lesser degree. The third area reconstructed a "curiosity room" from 1905 in which the mixture of manmade and zoological specimens and a lack of information implied that these were interesting but almost unknowable objects that demonstrated no aesthetic intent (Figures 12-3, 12-4) The fourth area showed objects in a natural-history-museum style, including the case described above (Figure 12-5), and a full diorama showing three men at the installation of a Mijikenda post (Figure 12-6). The last area displayed objects as in an art museum, as valuable treasures protected by Plexiglas and haloed in sanctifying spotlights (Figures 12-7, 12-8).

The exhibition was not meant to be chronological or arranged in ascending order of legitimacy. The labels pointed out that natural-history museums and dioramas are not out of date, and that a display very like the art-museum one was used by Alfred Steiglitz in 1914, about the time when African objects were beginning to be considered

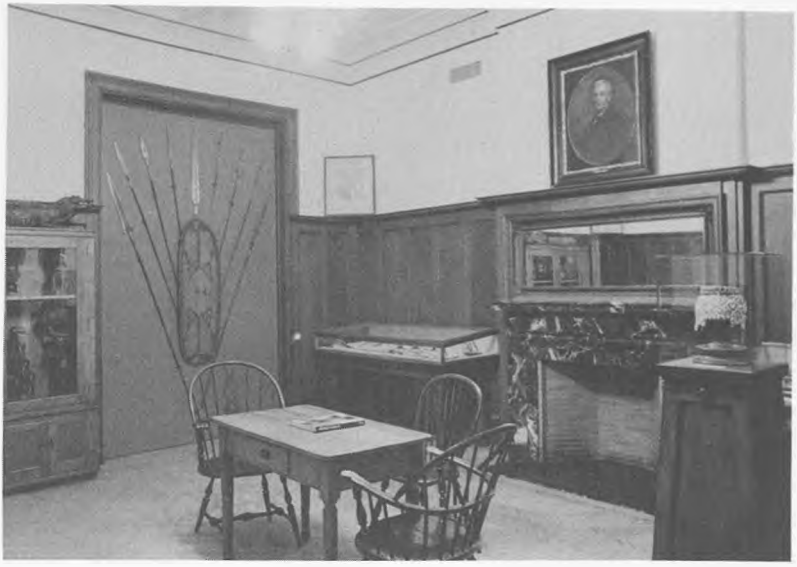

Fig. 12-3. *Recreation of the curiosity room from the Hampton Institute, circa 1905. The mixture of zoological and ethnographic "curiosities" was typical of the period. This style of presentation suggests that the African objects have no complex meanings and implies that everything—sculptured figures, spears, the crocodile, beadwork, and other objects—is of equal value and interest. In practice, Hampton's room served as a very advanced learning tool where teachers used the collection for hands-on instruction of the sort current in museums today. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

art. The exhibition stressed that these different styles reflected differences in attitude and interpretation, and that the viewer was manipulated by all of them.

As visitors left the exhibition to wander into other displays, I hoped they would be able to regard all museum activities with a wiser and more critical eye, eventually to become aware of the less publicly visible choices made by museums that influence what they see when they look through the Plexiglas at an object.

Politically aware visitors often focus on the value and ownership of museum objects, on questions regarding how the works arrived in the museum, who paid for the exhibition, and who profits from it. But these are only the most obvious issues among many more subtle ones.

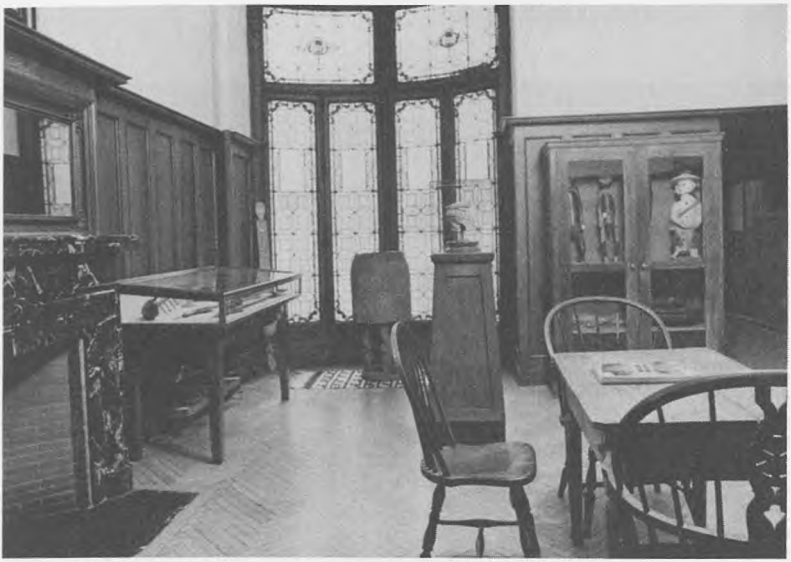

Fig. 12-4. *Recreation of the Hampton Institute curiosity room with a Mijikenda post in the corner near a Cameroon drum. The unprotected, rather casual presentation of these objects suggests that they are not very valuable, and does not suggest that the visitor should regard them as works of art. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

Fig. 12-5. *Display in the style of a natural-history museum. Objects are used to illustrate points about African culture (e.g., "The Place of the Dead in the World of the Living"), not for their intrinsic qualities. The evenness of the display indicates that all these objects are to be regarded equally, though some are in fact fine works of art and others are ordinary. In this context, the Mijikenda post takes on a banal appearance. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

Fig. 12-6. *Diorama in the style of a natural-history museum, showing the installation of a Mijikenda post. The diorama allowed the museum to show many aspects of material culture, social interaction, and environment simultaneously. The presentation discourages the viewer from singling out the Mijikenda post for special attention, and makes its boundaries unclear—are the two smaller posts part of it? the cloths? the pot and gourds? Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

The museum is teaching—expressly, as part of an education program and an articulated agenda, but also subtly, almost unconsciously—a system of highly political values expressed not only in the style of presentation but in myriad facets of its operation. The banners in front of the building tell the visitor what really matters before he or she has entered the display. The museum communicates values in the types of programs it chooses to present and in the audiences it addresses, in the size of staff departments and the emphasis they are given, in the selection of objects for acquisition, and more concretely in the location of displays in the building and the subtleties of lighting and label copy. None of these things is neutral. None is overt. All tell the audience what to think beyond what the museum ostensibly is teaching.

The radical dislocation of most objects in museums has become a firmly established tradition in the West. Many museum visitors expect to see in art museums practically everything from tombs and altars to

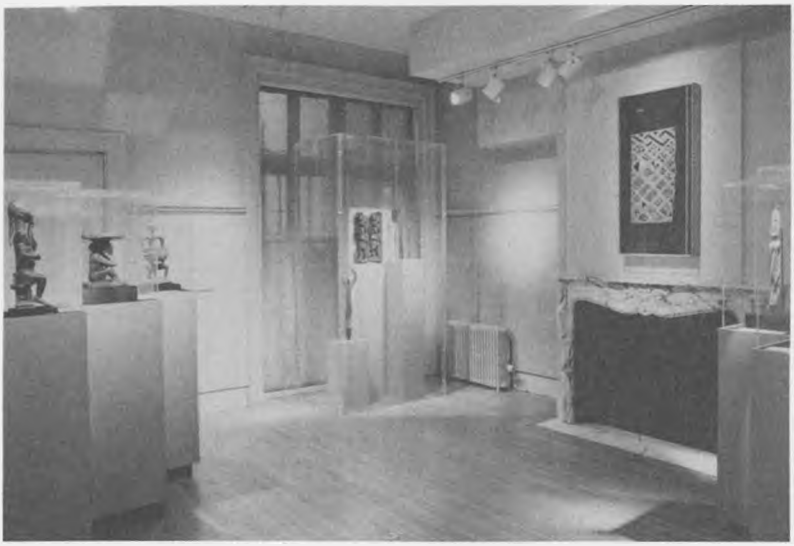

Fig. 12-7. *African figures and utilitarian objects exhibited as in an art museum. Both figurative and nonfigurative objects are shown here, including spears similar to those displayed in the curiosity room (see Figure 12-3). Here, however, the presentation associates them with a metal sculpture and invites the viewer to consider their artistic qualities. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

shoes and clocks; the visitors' relative lack of experience of these artifacts in their original contexts makes them unaware of how much the museum itself influences what they see.

The fact that museums recontextualize and interpret objects is a given, requiring no apologies. They should, however, be self-aware and open about the degree of subjectivity that is also a given. Museum professionals must be conscious about what they do and why, and they should inform the public that what it sees is not material that "speaks for itself" but material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time. The museum must allow the public to know that it is not a broad frame through which the art and culture of the world can be inspected, but a tightly focused lens that shows the visitor a particular point of view. It could hardly be otherwise.

Fig. 12-8. *Presentation of African sculptures in the style of an art museum. Each piece is isolated to be contemplated as a work of art. The presentation under Plexiglas suggests that each work is uniquely valuable and must be protected. The Mijikenda posts again appear, here as abstracted figure sculpture. Installation view of Art/artifact at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988.* Photo courtesy of the Center for African Art.

NOTES

1. If indeed they are to be considered artists in the African case. This is an example of a fundamental and potentially distorting assumption that remains an unexamined—or at least unarticulated—foundation underlying many African-art exhibitions.

2. The catalogue by the same title (published in 1988 by the Center for African Art) contains texts on collecting and illustrations of the objects in collections, but none of the comparative objects.

3. A case full of Baule masks had a label stating: "CAUTION: THERE ARE FAKES IN THIS CASE. Face masks; Baule, Ivory Coast; Wood, paint, metal, fiber. Such masks are worn in entertainment dances. Here are two blatant fakes, an honest reproduction, two extraordinary old masks, and two merely authentic masks." Beyond the case was a second label identifying the specific masks: "From left to right: 1. A forgery, betrayed by its excessive delicacy and insipid expression. Compare the timidity of the decoration around the chin,

and the meager little bird, with the others. 2. A fake. The lusterless surface and rote carving are typical of recent fakes. 3. An authentic mask probably dating from the 1940s or 1950s. Though the carving is vital and vigorous (compare this lusty bird with the others), it is heavy and the face is expressionless. 4. A reproduction, carved with competence, even virtuosity, but without deep conviction. No attempt has been made to age the mask or falsify the surface; no holes for the attachment of a putative costume have been made around the perimeter. 5. A great masterpiece. This mask, published early, probably dates from the nineteenth century. Its deeply contemplative expression, and the inspired reduction of the birds to just heads, reveal the hand of a great artist. It has preserved its original surface with all the variations of color and texture normally found on an old mask."

4. Some academics and those uninterested in the workings of taste and connoisseurship found this an unsatisfying exhibition, though it was popular with the public, who enjoyed testing their own judgment. If I were doing this show again I would include on the initial labels more information of the kind needed to judge the objects, or I would isolate and identify a good example for comparison.

5. Shown at the Center for African Art, New York; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Richmond, the San Diego Museum of Art; and the Birmingham Museum of Art between February 1987 and March 1988. The catalogue by the same title was published in 1987 by the Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

6. They were: Romare Bearden, Nancy Graves, and Iba N'Diaye, artists; Robert Farris Thompson, Africanist art historian; Ivan Karp, Africanist anthropologist; James Baldwin, writer; David Rockefeller, banker and collector; Ekpo Eyo, Africanist archaeologist; Lela Kouakou, Baule diviner and artist; William Rubin, modernist art historian.

7. *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, 83.

8. Ibid., 99.

9. Ibid., 163.

10. Ibid., 67.

11. Ibid., 115.

12. Ibid., 148–59.

13. Ibid., 51.

14. Ibid., 35.

15. The catalogue of the same title was published in 1987 by the Center for African Art and Prestel Verlag. It contained contributions by Susan Vogel,

Arthur Danto, R. M. Gramly, Jeanne Zeidler with Mary Lou Hultgren, Enid Schildkrout, Thomas McEviley, Kim Levin, and James Farris. Art/artifact was seen at the Center for African Art, New York; the Buffalo Museum of Science; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; the Carnegie Art Museum, Pittsburgh; the Denver Museum of Natural History; and the Wight Art Gallery, Los Angeles, between February 1988 and June 1990. The migration of the exhibition between art museums and science museums exactly reflects the issue it raises.